

# THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE // VOL. 108 NO. 3 SUMMER 2024



## LOOKING UP – CAN BIRDWATCHING IMPROVE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH?

BY RYAN NAKANO

Last December, twenty UC Berkeley students left the confines of the city, journeyed an hour and half to the peninsula of Point Reyes, and spent the night at the refurbished 1915 Hagmaier Ranch House/Point Reyes Field Station. Why? Not for a class field trip or research project, but to celebrate “dead week,” the week before finals, a week to rest, recharge and rejuvenate.

Driving along a desolate road, members of the UC Berkeley campus Audubon chapter, Bears for Birds, convened at Drake’s Beach and spent the next couple days being in nature, being with each other, and doing the one thing they all loved: birdwatching.

CONTINUED on page 3

California Towhee.  
Bob Gunderson







Western Snowy Plover.

Rick Lewis

## COMMITTING TO CLIMATE RESILIENCE

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

California is once again at the forefront of addressing climate change, and the Golden Gate Bird Alliance proudly supports the Climate Resilience Bond on the November ballot. This critical piece of legislation not only aims to mitigate the impacts of climate change but also promises to protect and restore essential bird habitat. As stewards of the environment and champions of our state's rich birdlife, we see the bond as a beacon of hope for a sustainable future.

At a time when general budget funds are being cut and previously awarded environmental grants are being canceled, the Bond which will secure \$10 billion for climate-

related projects, provides a path forward toward a more resilient California. It will fund a wide range of initiatives including wildfire prevention, water system upgrades, Indigenous land stewardship, and habitat restoration, all of which are vital in the fight against climate change. For me, the most exciting aspect of this bond is its focus on natural infrastructure and ecosystem restoration.

Birds are among the most sensitive indicators of environmental health. Unfortunately, climate change has already started to impact bird populations. Rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and

increased frequency of extreme weather events are disrupting migratory patterns and breeding cycles. Additionally, habitat loss due to wildfires and sea-level rise puts additional pressure on bird populations.

The Climate Bond addresses these challenges head-on. By investing in wildfire prevention and forest management, the act will help protect critical habitats from devastating fires, preserving essential habitats for species like the Northern Spotted Owl and the California Condor. These proactive measures are crucial for maintaining biodiversity and ensuring that our forests remain vibrant ecosystems.

The bond's focus on wetland and coastal restoration greatly benefits bird conservation. Wetlands provide critical feeding and nesting grounds for countless bird species. In restoring these areas, we create sanctuaries for birds such as the endangered Ridgway's Rail and threatened Least Tern and Western Snowy Plover. Coastal wetlands also act as natural buffers against storm surges and rising sea levels, protecting both wildlife and human communities.

California's Climate Resilience Bond will combat climate change and protect our natural heritage. For the Golden Gate Bird Alliance, supporting this bond is a natural extension of our mission to preserve and protect California's bird populations. This bond addresses the immediate threats posed by climate change and lays the groundwork for a healthier, more resilient environment for future generations. I urge you to join us in supporting the Climate Bond, for the sake of our birds, our ecosystems, and our planet.

### NEWS BRIEFS

#### New Board Member

In April the GGBA Board brought on Laurie Sample as the organization's newest board member. Laurie is an ESL and English Professor at Diablo Valley College and an avid birdwatcher. Laurie also leads birding field trips for GGBA to Regional Parks Botanic Garden in Tilden Park.

#### Summer Interns

Enterprise For Youth Climate Corps Interns; Jialing Wen, Marton Chen, Marilyn Duong, started assisting Golden Gate Bird Alliance staff with in-field and in-office projects to meet our conservation goals. We are grateful to have the help of these youth interns until mid-July.

#### East Bay Conservation Committee is Back

The East Bay Conservation Committee is regularly meeting again and working to develop an East Bay Bird Species of Concern document similar to our current SF Bird Species of Concern resource. If you're interested in getting involved with the committee contact [jcallaway@goldengatebirds.org](mailto:jcallaway@goldengatebirds.org).

#### Eco Education Expands

Golden Gate Bird Alliance just wrapped up its first year in partnership with the Richmond Outdoor Coalition (ROC) and collaborated with SF-based youth organization Real Options for City Kids (ROCK), expanding its eco-education program and curriculum to middle school and high school students.



LOOKING UP from page 1

“We had a night hike where we got to see herps and bugs, and in the morning, a bunch of quails,” former Bears for Birds officer Ronan Shikoda Alam said. “The whole trip was very good for my mental well-being.”

Mental health problems among college students are rising. Studies show an estimated 49% of students experience symptoms of depression and anxiety disorder (Healthy Minds Study 22-23). According to a recent wellness survey from the Office of the Chancellor at UC Berkeley, 66% of undergraduate students reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety” and 60% “debilitating depression.”

While access to on-campus mental health professionals is becoming overburdened by demand, researchers have been turning their attention to supplementary solutions for addressing the crisis, including nature-based interventions like birdwatching.

A recent experimental pilot study out of North Carolina State University (NCSU) titled “Birdwatching linked to increased psychological well-being on college campuses,” concluded that, compared to their peers, college students who engage in birdwatching reported increased psychological well-being and decreased psychological distress.

In the study, 112 NCSU campus participants were randomly split into three groups: birdwatching, nature walk, and a control group. Each group was asked to take a pre-treatment mental health assessment, engage in their assigned activity once a week for five weeks, and then take the same mental health assessment post-treatment.

The study’s results showed the greatest increase for WHO-5 scores (well-being) and the greatest decrease in STOP-D items (psychological distress) among the birdwatching group compared to the other two groups. While the difference between the birdwatching and control WHO-5 scores were not statistically significant, the difference for the Stop-D items was, suggesting a strong causal relationship between birdwatching and decreased psychological distress.

When asked why birdwatching might be a better nature-based intervention for improving mental health than other activities, Nils Peterson, one of the lead researchers of the study, suggested two reasons.



California Towhee.

Jerry Ting

## *Directly connecting and engaging with the natural world around us can be a healing experience.*

The first reason he gave is simple. Birdwatching is enjoyable and joy is good for well-being. At the same time, Peterson noted that birdwatching is an immersive experience, and “the more you’re immersed in it, the more you can escape all the stuff stressing you out.”

Last year, Bears for Birds officer Nathalie Orellana was working through a difficult period in her life. On top of the stress of being a minority in higher education, carrying the responsibilities of being a daughter of immigrants, and dealing with the pressure of studying and exams, Orellana was also processing the death of a friend.

“I would go out a lot on my own and I think just being outside and hearing the birds allowed me to ground myself,” shared Orellana. “I would genuinely be happy if I saw a California Towhee scratching at the ground. Seeing all of these birds around me really made me appreciative of my own life and the little things that bring me joy.”

Expanding on the mental health benefits of birdwatching, Lincoln Larson, the other lead researcher of the NCSU study, pointed to the psychological effect of ‘soft-fascination’ from Attention Restoration Theory.

“Our attention, especially in modern society, is directed at so many things that we can’t possibly respond to everything. But

when we get in a natural setting our attention can be held in more restorative ways in a kind of ‘soft-fascination’ where we can pause and self-reflect,” Larson said. “The thing is, if you’re just within nature, you’re not getting the same benefit that you would if you were intentionally interacting with the space.”

Acknowledging that birdwatching alone will not solve the current mental health crisis, the findings of these studies and anecdotal experiences of students suggest that directly connecting and engaging with the natural world around us—whether in the small green spaces of our urban environments or more remote natural landscapes—can be a healing experience.

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If you are in crisis, or experiencing thoughts of suicide, please text the Crisis Text Line (text HELLO to 741741) or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). These services are free and accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

For a list of other Bay Area Mental Health Resources visit: <https://bapapsych.org/mental-health-resources/>

For student mental health services specific to UC Berkeley visit: <https://uhs.berkeley.edu/student-mental-health>



# LESSONS FROM A LONG DAY OF COMPETITIVE BIRDING

BY RYAN NAKANO

**B**irdwatching is not a sport...until it is. On Saturday, April 27th, seven teams competed to see who could observe the most bird species in a single day in the Bay Area and raise the most money for Golden Gate Bird Alliance in the process.

When the dust settled, it was Tactical Shrike Force that came out on top, recording 165 species and raising \$18,118. Between all seven competing teams, over \$40,000 was raised to support GGBA, making the event a huge success.

So what does it take to go birding when birdwatching becomes a sport and the competition lasts all day?

**The Right Reason.** Before the glory of “winning” entered the mind’s of participants, it was the cause of conservation that drove teams to compete. Reaching out to friends and family, members of each team helped fundraise to support GGBA’s continued work in protecting local bird populations.

**Planning, Planning, and More Planning.** With a clear motivation established, teams entered into the planning stage. For the aptly named Tactical Shrike Force, this is where strategy kicks in. “We spent all this time planning and reviewing what birds had been seen and where,” TSF Team Captain Derek Heins said. “Some of us even went scouting for a Red-breasted Merganser before the competition.”

**Mental Fortitude (Early Birds).** And then the day comes and immediately each participant faces their first challenge: meeting the dawn chorus. “I learned that I’m able to wake up at 4am,” Vivian Hsu of team Pheasant Surprise said. “We started at 5 in Redwood Regional Park for a chance to catch owls and... it was worth it!”

**The Beauty of Birds.** Not too long after the serene sound of owls came sightings upon sightings of beautiful birds. “We walked around UC Berkeley campus for a while seeing a lot of the same birds. But then we found a Brown Creeper,” Titters and Swallows team member David Yeung said. “We also saw a Black-crowned Night Heron and Wild Turkey in the same tree!”

**Chasing Safety and Fulfillment.** Caught up in all of the excitement of bird sightings, participants can easily forget to be safe—and



Tactical Shrike Force at Lake Temescal.

Fred Werner

present in the moment. “The technology we use for birding is so great, but it can be distracting at times and prevent you from enjoying and connecting to a place,” Bird Your Enthusiasm team member Patrick Meeker said. “People wanted to get to as many places as possible, but when I was behind the wheel, I had to learn to put my phone down.”

**Midday Coffee Break.** At midday the birders were safe but sleepy as their energy levels began to wane. Fortunately for teams like the Tanager Managers, there was caffeine and community. “I had an energy slump in the late afternoon and a partner of one of our team members delivered coffee,” Tanager Manager Sarah Burton said. “It was a lesson for other people in the car that sometimes you can ask for things you need, and sometimes “the team” is much larger than you think.”

**Friends and Camaraderie.** After all is said and done, the competition is nothing compared to the friendship and camaraderie that comes from sharing the joy of birdwatching. “Some of us met for the first time ever in-person, and even though we did not get the most species, we worked really well as a team,” Angie Gieger said. At around 8pm, Geiger and the rest of the Righteous Roadrunners called it quits, charged the all-electric VW SUV they spent all day in, and celebrated their efforts observing great birds while leaving a minimal carbon footprint.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### Annual Membership Meeting

Join us at the Goldman Theater in the David Brower Center on Thursday, August 15 at 6pm to find out what GGBA is currently working on and what it has in store for the future! The membership meeting will be followed by our Monthly Speaker Series featuring Ed Yong!

### Return of the Terns

Learn from naturalists at Doug Siden Visitor Center about the incredible Least Tern’s behaviors and resilience, and get a special viewing of their nesting colonies at the Alameda Wildlife Refuge on Saturday, July 13. Register with East Bay Regional Parks District at <https://www.ebparks.org>.

### Contribute to our Blog & The Gull

Write for our online blog and our quarterly magazine *The Gull*. All are welcome to pitch their article ideas to [rnakano@goldengatebirds.org](mailto:rnakano@goldengatebirds.org). We are especially interested in publishing content from folks in underrepresented communities including; BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ individuals and people with disabilities.





Rosie (left) and Richmond (right) caught on the SF Bay Osprey Cam.

## SF BAY OSPREY CAM: BAY AREA HOTSPOT

BY WHITNEY GROVER

### LOCATION

[sfbayospreys.org](https://sfbayospreys.org)

***No need for  
sunscreen!  
Put the  
binoculars  
down, keep  
on your pjs,  
and tune in.***

Summer birding has its own quiet joys: fledglings figuring out the world, spring migrants busily preparing for their return trips, and the opportunity to truly appreciate our year-round residents. But when the heat gets too hot and the long days too long, there's another way to bird from the comfort of home. No need for sunscreen! Put the binoculars down, keep on your pjs, and tune in to the Golden Gate Bird Alliance Osprey Cam. You don't even need a backyard! And when the Osprey activity is slow you can watch the recorded highlights on the archives tab, posted by our dedicated team of Osprey volunteers.

You may not consider watching birds on your computer screen "birding," but I would argue that there are advantages to live webcam watching that perhaps bump it up closer to the real thing, not least of which is accessibility. While you may only see one species, and you aren't able to take advantage of all the other benefits of the outdoors, a webcam offers the opportunity to have an intimate experience with individual birds in a way you just can't get in the field, all while having as little impact on the birds as possible. You can tune in to the subtle behavior differences between individuals, up close and personal. As the breeding season and all its drama unfolds, you can

be there to share in the joy and disappointment.

The original cameras were installed on the historic Whirley Crane in the Port of Richmond back in 2017 to watch Rosie and Richmond, our beloved continuing pair. This past January 2024 we were able to upgrade one of the old cameras with state-of-the-art camera technology thanks to a grant received by the Contra Costa County Fish and Wildlife Committee. The new camera has more zoom, infrared night capability, more rotation degrees, and superior clarity.

But this breeding season, Rosie and Richmond reminded us again that nature is wild and unpredictable. Despite our best laid plans, they decided to nest on a lamp post waaaaaaay out from the Whirley Crane. If it weren't for the new camera we wouldn't be able to see them at all (though on days when the wind is high, the shaky view can be difficult to watch). Still, we're grateful they have returned, and grateful to have enough visibility to monitor their activity.

Keep your fingers and toes crossed that they return next year to the Whirley Crane nest site! As we write this piece there are two eggs laid on the lamp post nest, and by the time you read this, there could be chicks testing out their wings. Tune in to find out!

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Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact [rnakano@goldengatebirds.org](mailto:rnakano@goldengatebirds.org).

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DONATIONS

Golden Gate Bird Alliance gratefully acknowledges our major donors and the generous donors; volunteers and trip leaders who contributed during our 2024 Birdathon fundraiser. We also appreciate all those who registered for trips and participated in our online auction.

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\$10,000+

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Remember the Birds

Including Golden Gate Bird Alliance in your estate plan is a generous way to ensure that the Bay Area remains a haven for the birds you love.

A bequest can be expressed in a will as simply as, “I bequeath [a sum of money, a percentage of my estate, or an IRA, life insurance policy or investment/bank account] to Golden Gate Bird Alliance, 2150 Allston Way, Suite 210, Berkeley, CA 94704.”

Consult with your attorney to discuss your particular situation. Learn more on our website at goldengatebirdalliance.org/donation.

Please know that we work hard to ensure the accuracy of this list. If your name has been omitted or misspelled, let us know at 510.843.2222.



WHAT AN OWL KNOWS

JENNIFER ACKERMAN

Humans’ fascination with owls was first documented in the cave paintings at Chauvet in southern France. With their forward gaze and quiet flight, owls are often a symbol of wisdom, knowledge, and foresight. But what does an owl really know? And what do we really know about owls? Some 260 species of owls reside on every continent except Antarctica, but they are far more difficult to find and study than other birds because they are cryptic, camouflaged, and mostly active at night. Jennifer Ackerman explores the biology and natural history of owls and examines new scientific discoveries about their brains and behavior.

Jennifer Ackerman has been writing about nature and science for three decades. Her latest book, “What an Owl Knows: The New Science of the World’s Most Enigmatic Birds” is a New York Times bestseller. Her previous books include “The Genius of Birds” (2016) and “The Bird Way” (2020).



Great Horned Owlets in Nest

Jennifer Ackerman

HOW BIRDS SENSE THE WORLD

ED YONG

When you watch and listen to birds, have you wondered about what the birds themselves see and hear? Ed Yong, author of “An Immense World”, will take us on a magical tour through the sensory lives of our feathered friends. We’ll learn about the secrets hidden in their plumage and songs, and the incredible ways in which they see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and more.

Ed Yong is a Pulitzer-winning science writer, and the author of two bestselling books, including “An Immense World”. He moved to Oakland last May and started birding last September.



American Bittern.

Ed Yong

Zoom links and passcodes for upcoming presentations are available on our Speaker Series website at [goldengatebirdalliance.org/education/speaker-series](https://goldengatebirdalliance.org/education/speaker-series).

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MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Bird Alliance’s mission is to inspire people to protect Bay Area birds and our shared natural environment.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE

The Golden Gate Bird Alliance was founded January 25, 1917.

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward The Gull.

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[www.goldengatebirdalliance.org](http://www.goldengatebirdalliance.org)

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#### 1 Student Mental Health and Birding

Recent study shows that birdwatching might be a positive nature-based intervention for student mental health.

#### 4 Facing the "Big Day"

Bay Birding Challenge participants share what it takes to compete in an all-day birding competition.

#### 5 SF Bay Osprey Cam

Go birdwatching from home by tuning into our live SF Bay Osprey Cam to catch Rosie, Richmond and their offspring!

## BACKYARD BIRDER

Allison Weber



Black Necked Stilt at Coyote Point Marina.

## BLACK-NECKED STILT

BY BLAKE EDGAR

**K**ip. Kip. Kip. Kip. Kip." On a warm May morning at Hayward Regional Shoreline, two adult Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) call insistently and incessantly to their days-old chicks, swimming in tight circles and pecking at the water's surface. No wonder *The Shorebird Guide* describes the Black-necked stilt as "a noisy bird of quiet waters."

This pair of downy chicks was able to swim within hours of hatching, leave a nest that was likely a shallow scrape on bare

ground, maybe lined with bits of shell or vegetation, and begin to explore their world. The protective parents actively defended the nest and surrounding territory, taking turns incubating their eggs and guarding against the eggs overheating by soaking their belly feathers in water.

Now buff brown with black specks, the chicks will fledge after a month and begin to grow into the two-tone plumage of their parents: black above and white below. Despite its common name, the stilt's long slim neck is mostly white, with a black stripe down the back extending from a black mask and cap to black wings. Other distinguishing marks include a white eyebrow patch above a red eye and a pincer-like black bill.

Stilt is an apt name for a bird that stands on spindly legs more than seven inches long. Except for flamingos, Black-necked Stilts possess the longest legs in proportion to their body of any bird. In flight, the lanky legs extend straight behind the wings, while on land a stilt must bend its legs to reach the ground.

Striding gracefully and deliberately through shallow wetlands, marshes, ponds, and lakes, the Black-necked Stilt is a visual forager, gleaning and plucking food from the surface or picking insects out of the air. It may briefly submerge its head but does not sway its bill scythe-like in the manner of an American Avocet. The stilt's diet includes brine shrimp, brine flies, other insects and crustaceans, snails, small fish, and tadpoles.

Found across the western and southern United States, Black-necked Stilts are resident around San Francisco Bay. Look for them at shorelines managed by the East Bay Regional Park District or at Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.